

Let Our Bones Dance (2/3)

Dr. Justo L. González



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“The hip bone connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone connected to the knee bone; the knee bone connected to the leg bone.” Here again is another insight of the old spiritual into the meaning of the vision of Ezekiel. Look again at the text. Ezekiel did not see a bunch of bones, each doing its own dance. I can imagine a choral composition, “phantasie macabre,” with the femurs over here rising up and marching in line while the vertebrae jump around, and the sacroiliac keep rhythm.

But that is not what Ezekiel saw. What he says is “and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh came on them.”

AETH

The connection between the bones is important. God has intended these bones to be part of bodies, and God will not give life to each of them separately. Before the bones can live, they must be connected.

Yesterday our theme was “Let my bones dance.” Today, we take up a new theme, “Let our bones dance.” As we do so, it may be good to look again at the vision of the dry bones, now thinking not so much in terms of each of us as one of those dead skeletons that came to life, but rather as one of those bones which could only live in relationship to each other: “The hip bone

connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone connected to the knee bone.”

As we do this, the obvious other passage in Scripture that immediately comes to mind is 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul compares the life of the church and its members with that of a body and its members. To that we shall return.

First, however, it may be useful to continue our process of referring the vision of Ezekiel back to the early chapters of Genesis, for there too we learn something of the interconnectedness of human life. In the creation story in Genesis 2, God begins by making heaven and earth, then Eden, then man. In this case, it is the male, man in the literal sense, that is created. Then, in Gen. 2:18, we are told that God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

Notice the contrast, between this story and that in the first chapter of Genesis. In Genesis one, God creates the plants and animals first, and human beings last. And male and female are created at the same time. In this second story, God creates the human male first, and then says, “it is not good for the man to be alone.” Thus, in the next verse God begins to respond to that need, in order to perfect creation: “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast in the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.”

Thus, for “man not to be alone” did not mean only that he should have a wife. It meant also

that there should be an entire creation around him. In other words, that “man” is not complete by himself. From the very act of creation, this creature is intended for companionship. And this companionship is not only that of the woman, but also of all of creation. In and by himself, the man is not “good.” He is not the good creation of God.

What God then creates in order to make this lone man fully human is “a helper fit for him.” Let us first of all clarify what these words mean, for they have been the object of very bad interpretation. The King James Version correctly translated this text as “a help meet” for him, meaning a fitting help. Unfortunately, our sexist society then joined the two words together, created the word “helpmeet,” and into it poured all its preconceived notions of what a wife ought to be. But such interpretation errs on two counts. First of all, the word translated as “help” has none of the connotations of a meek, docile, self-effacing “ideal” wife in the traditional sense. On the contrary, it is a word most often applied to God as the “help” of Israel. Secondly, what is translated as “meet” in the KJV, and as “fit” in the RSV, literally means “as in front of him.” What is thus implied is something like a mirror image, a counterpart, and not necessarily a subordinate being. Actually, the difference between the woman and all the animals is precisely that they are not “fit for him.” They are not bad. They are simply not equal to the man. They are by nature subject to him, as is shown by the fact that he has the power of naming them. Naming, it must be pointed out, is much more than dividing what something is to be called. In the Biblical perspective, naming is a means of control, a sign of power over another. Perhaps we still keep something of that view when we refer to someone’s name as their

“handle.”

Then comes the “rib episode,” which has usually been interpreted in the sense that, since the woman comes from the man, she is to be subordinate to him. But that is not the way the man in this narrative interprets the events. On the contrary, what he recognizes is that she is his counterpart, his mirror image, the one “fit for him” —or “as in front of him.” And therefore he declares: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of the Man” (Gen. 2:23). What the first half of these words indicate is not lordship, but recognition. Finally the man has seen his counterpart, the one “fit for him” as a mirror image. The rest of his words are not really an act of naming. He does not give her a separate name, but calls her by his own name in its feminine form. He is ish, and she will be ishah.

The man is not “good,” because he has another “fit for him.” And, as this other is “fit” like a mirror image, she too is good, for she too has a helper fit for her. To be fully human is to be for others, and therefore God’s human creature is not complete until there is another to be for.

Let me hasten to add, however, that the married couple exemplified in the story of Adam and Eve is just one of many ways in which humans fulfill each other. This story does not mean that humans are complete only in marriage. If that were so, we would have to conclude that Jesus was not fully human. Being fully human is being for—others. This is intended to occur in our

many human relationships, and not only in marriage.

It is also significant to note that, contrary to most traditional interpretation, in the Genesis text there is no hint of subordination. In the first creation narrative, all of creation is to be subordinate to the human creation, both male and female (Gen. 1:26-27). In this second narrative, the birds and the beasts are under the authority of the man, who names them—naming is a way of having control over the named. Presumably, when the woman appears on the scene, and is declared to be flesh of the man's flesh and bone of his bones, and "fit for him," she is also to share in his dominion over the creatures which he has named. In any case, it is only in Genesis 3, as a result of sin, that the subjection of the woman to her husband enters the scene. It is significant to note that the man is quick to assert this authority resulting from sin, for in Genesis 3:20, immediately after the curses, we are told that "the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." Before, he had shared his name with her. Now he stands apart from her. And names, just as earlier he had named the birds and the beasts. From the very beginning of life after sin, the man uses his authority to subject and dehumanize the woman. But in so doing he dehumanizes himself, for he no longer has a "helper fit for him," and therefore the words again apply: "it is not good for man to be alone."

The subjection of a human being to another—in this case the wife to the husband—is the result of sin, and expression thereof. The creature, male and female, that in the story of Genesis 1 was to have dominion over the rest of creation, was not to have dominion over its fellow human

beings. In Genesis 1:26-27, it is both the male and the female that are to have dominion. But in Genesis 3, after the fall, the man claims dominion over the woman by giving her a name not his own. In this naming, they are alienated from each other. They are no longer ish and ishshah. Now she is “Eve,” named by Adam. Their intended for-otherness, based on their being “fit” for each other, “as in front of” each other, is now disrupted. Thus is the society of dominance born, in which we are alienated from each other precisely because we seek to lord it over each other. In such a society, it is not only the “other” that is lost. We are all lost because we have lost our for-otherness, and God rightly said that “it is not good” for us to be for ourselves.

It may seem that we have strayed far from our text in Ezekiel. And indeed it may be so. But all of this is important to understand the connectedness of which we were speaking at first: “the hip bone connected to the thigh bone, the thigh bone connected to the knee bone; the knee bone connected to the leg bone.”

In human society, there are various forms in which we may be connected with each other. One of these forms is that of power and dominance. There are some types of social organization in which that type of connection must be paramount. In an army, the general must be able to tell the officers what to do, and they must in turn be able to command the rank and file.

Unfortunately, since that type of organization appears very efficient and supposedly “gets things done,” we tend to think that such is the best organization there is, and that the bones should be

connected with each other in some hierarchical fashion. It is at this point that a look at 1 Cor. 12 may be helpful.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as God chose. If all were a single organ, where one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor the hand again to the feet, "I have no need of you."

This points to the first type of connection without which our bones cannot live: the interconnection of function. Just as the eye cannot hear without the ear, and the ear cannot see without the eye, the entire body cannot live without the interdependence of its members. This means both that no one can opt out and that no one can be left out. No one can opt out. The foot cannot say, "because I am not a hand, I am not part of the body." No one can be left out. The hand cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you." We each need each other. To exclude another, or to exclude ourselves, is to harm both ourselves and the body as a whole.

But the text continues with a few verses that we often gloss over:

The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

This is a strange text, and it is not surprising that we hear so little preaching on it. Its strangely subversive character struck me personally some twenty years ago, when in the wake of the II Vatican Council there was a flush of enthusiasm for ecumenical ceremonies, often designed more for show than for substance. In one of those ceremonies, it was my turn to read Scripture. With me on the platform were the Roman Catholic Archbishop, with all his pomp and circumstance. Next to him were the Episcopal and the Methodist bishops, also with many-colored robes. I myself wore academic garb. The passage to be read, as is often the case in such gatherings, was 1 Cor. 12. I stood up and read; but when I came to these lines I could hardly keep a straight face: "those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty." We who sat at the platform, we who were dressed with most honor, we who thought we were the big shots, we were the unpresentable parts of the body!

So this takes us to the second thing to be said about the manner in which bones are connected in this strange body which is the people of God. They are connected in such a way as to give more power to the weakest, more honor to the most humble. Or, as Jesus would put it, they are connected in such a way that first shall be last. Our connectedness, the sinews that bind these bones together, is not hierarchy, nor power, not authority, but love. And, as Paul would say in the next chapter of the Epistle, love is not boastful; love is not arrogant; love is not irritable or resentful; love does not rejoice in the wrong, but rejoices in the right. In a world in which there is much that is wrong, love cannot but subvert whatever injustice there is.

In this particular body, as v. 22 says, the parts that seem to be weaker are the most indispensable. There may be many seasons for this. But one reason, closely related to our text in Ezekiel, is that it is often the case that those who seem to be weaker, those who are in situations of oppression, those for whom there seems to be no hope, they are the ones who most readily understand and receive the word of hope and power which comes from God.

In modern theological jargon, some people refer to this as “the hermeneutical advantage of the poor.” But it is not necessary to be a theologian in order to see how this works. I was saying yesterday that the old Afro-American spiritual shows an insight into Ezekiel’s vision that is greater and clearer than many theological discussions of it. Why is this so? Mostly because, when it came to understanding what it means to feel as dead and as hopeless as dry bones, the slave who first sang these words had a clear advantage over the master who drank mint juleps on the veranda. Being asked to sing the Lord’s songs by the rivers of Babylon was no strange experience for the slave whose song in the cotton fields amused and entertained the master. And so, while the master could read a learned commentary on Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones, the slave could live it, and could sing and dance: “Them bones is gonna rise again. The hip bone connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone connected to the knee bone.”

There is only one way in which our bones can dance the dance of new life in the Spirit. That is the way of solidarity. Paul concludes: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” This is necessary for the life of the body, so that if one member

feels as dry as bone, all will know what it is to be as dry as bones; and if one part of the body knows what it is to believe that “them bones is gonna rise again,” the entire body may experience and live the joy of the divine promise.

We want to let our bones dance. But our bones cannot dance alone. At least, they cannot dance alone the dance of God. For the dance of God is the dance of love and justice, and we cannot dance it while excluding those who are crushed and exploited, and hungry, and homeless, and excluded from the great dance of life. Like it or not, there is only one way that “them bones is gonna rise again”; and that is “the hip bone connected to the thigh bone, the thigh bone connected to the knee bone, the knee bone connected to the leg bone....”

